



Learning environments  
can make a strategic  
difference for business.

# LEVERAGING

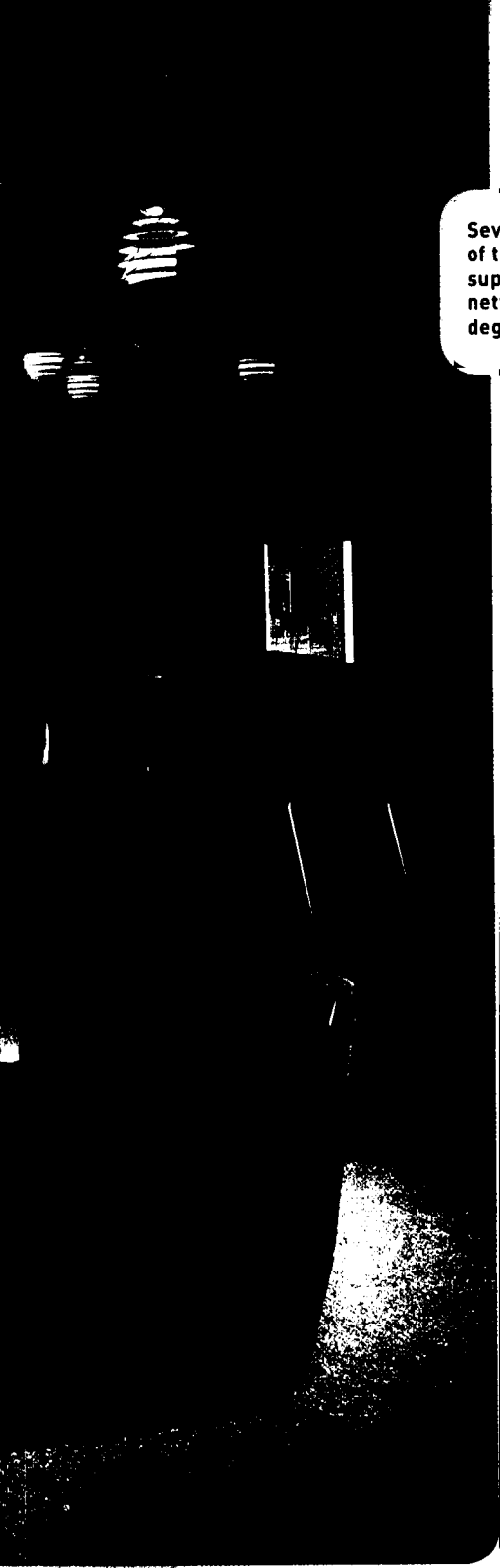
## the Learning Space

By George A. Wolfe

**I**n virtually any occupation, learning is a part of the job. Gone are the days when employees learned to master a single task and then spent the next 40 years repeating that task. Workers are expected to solve problems in teams, collaborate,

build on the work of others, and leverage shared knowledge to gain a competitive advantage.

These changes in the way people work, coupled with the explosion in technology and a mind-boggling amount of new knowledge, demand



Seventy percent of the lobby and cafe area of the Steelcase University Learning Center supports informal learning and social networking. Interior walls are set at a 45-degree angle to create dimension and depth.

news is that the same 100-year-old grid of desks facing the instructor still dominates today's learning spaces.

Can this learning space be improved? Might there be a missed opportunity here? In Steelcase CEO Jim Hackett's mind, the answer is a resounding "yes!"

### **The science of workspace efficiency**

Steelcase has put many years and significant resources into researching how space is used. Under the guidance of Hackett, the company that built its reputation as a leading office furniture manufacturer has spent the last decade making the transition into a knowledge company with cutting-edge expertise in work environments.

"Our efforts in the office arena have had such a profound impact on workplace productivity and efficiency that we've expanded our focus to include healthcare space and learning environments," Hackett says. "Our research spotlights huge changes in how learning happens. Today's learners need an environment that supports several new ways of learning rather than the constraints of a standard chalkboard and two flip charts."

Using ethnographic and observational methods known as user-centered design, Steelcase researchers study groups of people as they solve problems, share ideas, and engage in work activities. The research is conducted in the space where participants actually work and learn, not in a separate research facility. At Steelcase, cameras and contextual interviewing techniques are used to gather data.

"We are truly doing this as a science," says Joyce Bromberg, director of workspace futures at Steelcase. "The user behavior methodology is more reliable than focus groups, surveys, and interviews in which people tend to answer the way they think you want

them to. Video data helps us identify solutions because it captures 'work-arounds,' the makeshift ways people use to interact and communicate. It shows us how people function in spite of their environment. We can then build or renovate space based on demonstrated user requirements. When the environment changes to support them, we see greater efficiency in learning. Often people don't know what they need or what's missing until they have it. Then they wonder what they ever did without it."

It was this same research process that led to the design and development of the state-of-the-art Steelcase University Learning Center, which functions as a real-life showcase and laboratory for learning in the business world. The learning center epitomizes the research-based integration of technology, architecture, and furniture in support of learning.

Through ongoing study, Steelcase continues to reshape its corporate learning environment, most recently by opening a learning lab. Without question, the learning center is making a strategic difference for the organization.

### **Space and innovation**

How can a learning environment play a strategic role in moving an organization forward? In companies where innovation is paramount to growth and productivity, an environment that invites exchange, interaction, and risk stimulates new ideas and solutions. Environments affect both mood and brain power. For example, humming fluorescents and beige walls beg caffeine. For most thinkers, creativity and problem solving are unleashed with exposure to nature, light, art—and soaring spaces. In a corporate learning environment, such space adds real value to the business because it supports creative thinking.

We know that wherever learning and development takes place, there is potential for a breakthrough. People are already in a learning mode when they come in. Why have a passive backdrop in the one place where you want good ideas to flourish? Why not inspire?

changes in the way people learn at work.

The good news is that corporations have put a lot of effort into developing quality learning programs, ensuring facilitator excellence, and using technology when possible. The bad

## Steelcase University Learning Center

From the outside, you can tell it was a factory building. Approaching from the east, the windowless structure is nondescript—until you see the entrance. Four stories of glass and beams reflect the West Michigan sun. On the walk to the doorway, you see a little bronze man out of the corner of your eye, seated on a concrete ledge with his laptop. Just inside the door, another little bronze man on a bench disarms you with his smile. Gradually, a ramp leads you to a third little man, this one “working the board”—a giant chalkboard filled with compelling quotes that get you thinking before you approach the reception desk. And that’s the idea. This is a place to think. It’s an eye-opening entry into a space that opens minds from the minute you step inside. Equipped with state-of-the-art technology and work tools, this facility invites everyone—from hourly workers to top executives—to think creatively and engage.

The Steelcase University Learning Center is the culmination of years of research and benchmarking to understand how learning space influences an organization. Rather than construct a new building, the decision was made to reclaim an unused portion of an existing factory, thereby saving time, money, and green space.

In 1999, the original, 1960s 1 million-square-foot manufacturing facility underwent a conversion. The following year, marking a new millennium, the 63,000-square-foot learning showcase came alive. Hundreds of organizations visit annually to benchmark the space, the social network capabilities, and the latest tools. This learning environment is the center of strategy for Steelcase: an incredibly rich setting with a global reach, where learning becomes performance.

“At Steelcase,” Bromberg says, “our perspective is that we need people to come together for creativity and innovation. Inspiring space supports this knowledge activity. It’s a catalyst for innovation.”

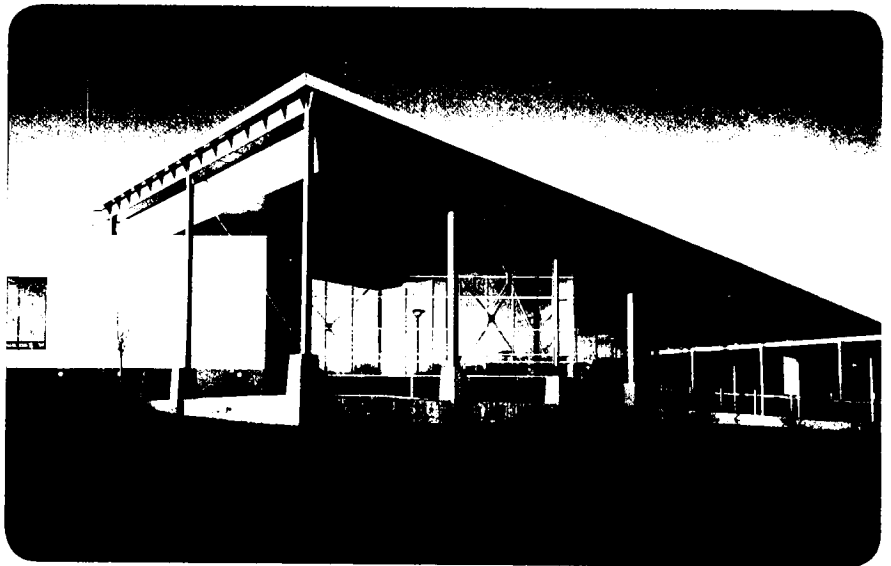
### The role of space in cultural change

With so many organizations experiencing mergers, acquisitions, or reorganization, having a well-thought-out learning environment has tremendous potential for supporting—even driving—cultural change. In the face of

such change, the right learning environment functions as a hub for conversation, healthy debate, and getting the right messages out.

Studies show that between 70 and 80 percent of learning in corporations happens informally. This means learners share information and knowledge outside of a structured, facilitated environment. At Steelcase, the percentages translate quite literally into a 70-30 percent split between informal and formal learning space in the learning center.

Built into the 63,000-square-foot facility is more than 44,000 square feet



of flexible, informal space that invites people to come together for private exchange as well as spontaneous group interaction. It fosters cooperation and collaboration and has played a key role in helping the organization become a progressive knowledge company.

“It helps to get out and understand other functions,” Bromberg says. “If people stay in their caves, the synergy just doesn’t happen.”

Putting as much care into the engineering of informal meeting spaces as formal classroom spaces is a great way to set the stage for desired cultural shifts.

In cases where cultures change through acquisitions, a strong corporate learning element makes important cohesive processes easier. When leaders can come together on neutral ground in an atmosphere clearly designed to welcome interaction, space plays a crucial role in promoting consistency in new leader behaviors and changing how work is completed, how procedures are integrated, and how concerns are shared. It paves the way for faster cultural transitions, ensuring better results for the business.

**Space and change management**  
The challenges of managing change can be difficult enough when they

require risk taking, negotiation, and the ability to nurture buy in. Sometimes, space actually prevents rather than promotes necessary progress, especially in organizations that are compartmentalized.

For any company tackling change management issues, the learning environment can accelerate change by facilitating both the formal and informal learning necessary to support new directions. Learning space can be used to foster the effectiveness of new work communities, cross-functional communication, and facilitated group sessions, and to initiate the cascade process with leaders.

When Steelcase University's learning management system was upgraded to expand its reach and global effectiveness, the university took advantage of change management steps and the learning center to align employees and leaders with the changes. Early in the planning process, the learning center became the site for cross-functional

teams. Launch activities held in the learning center ranged from town hall meetings to lunch-and-learn sessions to virtual teaching sessions to onsite signage and visuals. The space essentially became the table people gathered around and the common ground for understanding the what, why, and how of the new system.

For a corporate learning environment to effectively help change how things work in an organization, leaders need to ask: Is our current environment a roadblock—or does it promote open-mindedness and progress in the face of change?

### Strategic alignment with the enterprise

Imagine the impact as leaders from all major functions in an organization come together regularly to a place specifically designed to focus attention on the business at hand. Connections are forged informally while more formal group gatherings provide a forum for

# Today's learners need an environment that supports several new ways of learning.

bringing everyone into clear alignment with enterprise strategies. The physical presence alone actually helps this strategic alignment take place; dedicated learning space reinforces the corporate mindset.

Nine classrooms and 10 breakout areas feature flexible, people-friendly furniture and the latest in technology. Each can be easily reconfigured to fit the specific needs of the users.





The Steelcase University Learning Center showcases the future of learning environments.

The Steelcase University Learning Center is known as the place for employee leadership development. Functioning as an enabler in uniting people and vision, the facility has led to hands-on, participatory leadership development practices that have won awards.

"Before the learning center, we didn't have an effective way to strategically align our team," Hackett says. "Now we can convene our global leadership physically and virtually. We have a reference point, a place with a reputation for the best synergy of thought."

It is a centering force for the business, and senior executives tend to spend as much time there as in their private offices.

### The value for knowledge companies

A strong physical learning presence is often overlooked in knowledge companies, but if your company's value to the customer is knowledge and if knowledge is seen as a differentiator for your company's business, dedicated space can reinforce your employees' capabilities. For Steelcase, the facility is a testament to the fundamental beliefs of the enterprise, a belief in knowledge sharing as a key component for ongoing success.

Knowledge sharing is an achievable corporate goal that can influence the bottom line when it's set in an atmosphere that supports engagement between knowledge providers and knowledge consumers. Before the Steelcase

University Learning Center existed, training efforts at the company were handled at the functional level. The opening of the learning center brought all of the efforts under one roof, allowing for consolidation at a more formal level, reducing redundancies, facilitating consistency, and unifying knowledge sharing processes. Learning changed from tactical to strategic.

Informally, face-to-face sharing between executives with 20 to 40 years of experience and up-and-coming managers can bridge knowledge gaps and preserve valuable corporate intelligence. An environment that promotes such social networks nurtures loyalty and mature business thinking. When you create a setting that brings together diverse perspectives, diverse ages, and uniquely mixed groups, you shorten learning curves. Knowledge sharing thrives in the right environment. It's a very real, long-term competitive advantage.

### Learning space works

The diversity of teaching and learning styles today demands a range of learning environments. For corporations, there is still a place for traditional classrooms and conventional lecture halls, but new learning environments can propel thinking to new levels. Space does matter.

An effective learning environment doesn't require expensive renovation. Ingenuity and thoughtful design can help organizations leverage their formal and informal space to make a difference.

"On days when I walk into our learning center and it's humming—I know it's all working," Hackett says. "Change management, knowledge sharing, networking, strategic alignment, problem solving, good communication. When I see these things happening I feel good about the health of our company." **T+D**

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## Growing Talent and Sales at McCormick

Tony Bingham and Pat Galagan

McCormick & Company had a tough year in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina and a collapsing market for vanilla took their toll, but during Bob Lawless's tenure as chairman and CEO, the spice company's recovery has been remarkably strong. Net sales and the gross profit margin both increased in 2006, and the company expects to increase sales by 4 percent in 2007. *T+D* talked with Lawless about how the company's learning efforts support its key strategies.

One ambitious growth initiative is a leadership development program known as multiple management boards (MMB).

"It's an action learning program that combines developing talent with achieving actual company goals," says Lawless. "The people in the MMB group learn how to lead while working on projects for the company around the globe."

According to Lawless, the company invests "every penny we can" in learning.

"There isn't a benchmark," he says. "Money is not a restriction. Learning is driven by only one thing: strategy. We do business in China and Europe, and we are going into India. So we have a training and development strategy and a process for that. That's not a place to cut investment."

*For complete text, see page 30.*

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## The Company That Teaches Together Performs Together

Rick Frattali

At McCormick & Company, the organization's learning philosophy is rooted in *The Power of People*, written by Charles P. McCormick who led the company from 1932 to 1969. In 1949, he wrote, "Business is primarily a matter of people," and "My greatest satisfaction as president of a company has been in watching people who work for me grow as the business grows."

While performance-based training and development has always been a key business strategy at McCormick, the goal of an adaptable learning organization and the potential loss of expertise from baby boomer retirements led the company to identify a new need: to create a teaching organization in which knowledge and expertise are shared at all levels globally. As a result, the mission of the global learning and development function was modified five years ago to reflect the idea that a teaching organization is a key driver for a learning organization.

McCormick is currently implementing high performance work systems at its manufacturing locations. The concept is a team-based operating philosophy that focuses on six systems: goal setting, performance management, problem solving, training and development, information systems, and rewards and recognition.

*For complete text, see page 36.*

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## Leveraging the Learning Space

George A. Wolfe

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*For complete text, see page 40.*

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